

SOME EXAMPLES OF ENGLISH ALABASTER TABLES IN FRANCE.¹

By COUNT PAUL BIVER.

Towards the end of the middle ages, English alabaster carvings were exported in large numbers to the continent. The brilliancy of these objects, executed in a white and crystalline material, set off by touches of somewhat crude colour, and highly gilt, was evidently a factor in their popularity. Above all their cheapness must have multiplied considerably the number of their purchasers. Their profitable production was an easy matter: alabaster was neither rare nor hard to work. In the workshop, one man might be told off to produce Assumptions, another to make Flagellations or figures of Our Lady of Pity, all to a stock pattern. Again, the application of gesso, which gave to the carvings their appearance of richness and finish, was a purely mechanical process which could be carried out at moderate cost. Orders consequently poured in from Flanders, France, Italy, Spain, and even from more distant countries. While important churches placed orders for stone or marble monuments with local craftsmen, many poor parishes, not too far from the sea, found it easier to buy from the English alabaster-men. They exported all manner of work, statues, statuettes, Virgins, Trinities, saints in full relief, tombs with weepers, heads of St. John², great reredoses closed by painted shutters, and triptychs with alabaster panels.

I. SOME ALABASTER TRIPTYCHS.

These triptychs consist of panels and statuettes in wooden frames, in three parts: the middle frame was double the width of the two others, which formed shutters fixed by hinges at its sides. Thus hidden and protected,

¹ Translated by the Editor.

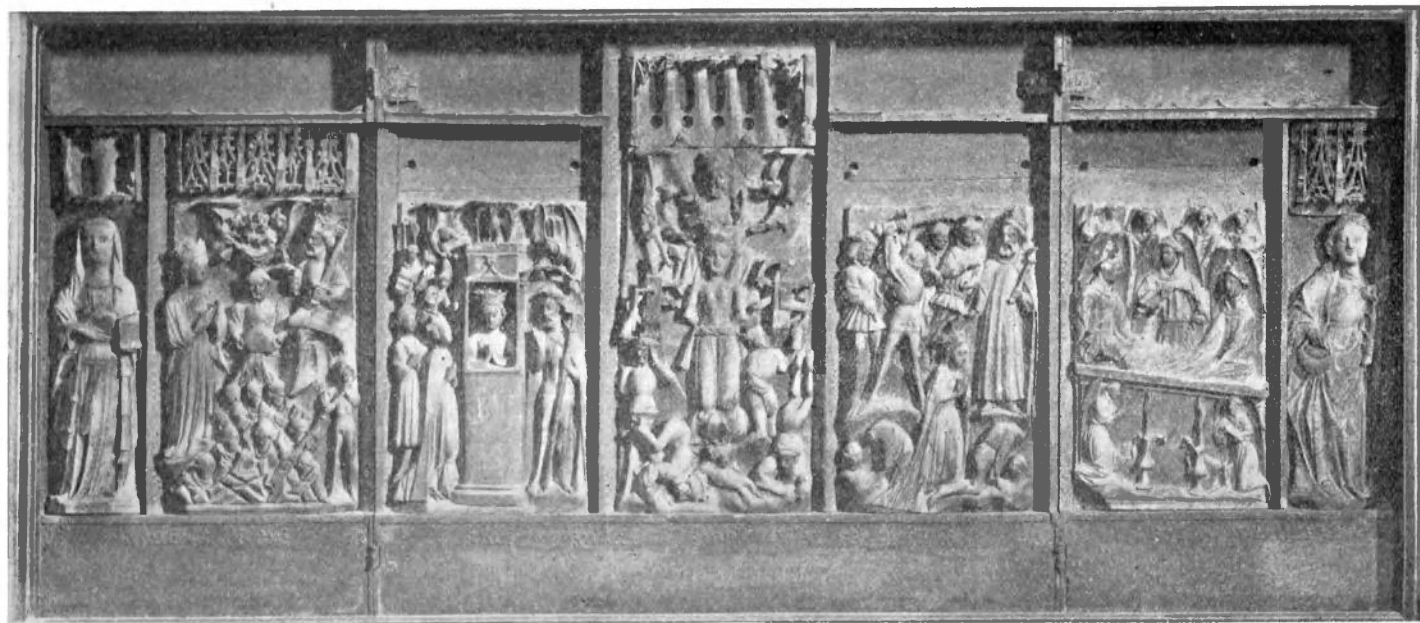
² W. H. St. John Hope on The sculptured

alabaster tables called St. John's heads,
Archaeologia, lii, 669-708.



[P. Biver, phot.]

TRIPTYCH AT MONTREAL (YONNE), REPRESENTING SCENES FROM THE LIFE OF THE VIRGIN,
AND THE MASS OF ST. GREGORY.



TRIPTYCH IN ST. CATHERINE'S CHURCH, VENICE, REPRESENTING SCENES FROM THE LIFE OF ST. CATHERINE.

[P. Biver, phot.]

these fragile carvings required but little packing, and formed excellent objects for export.

All these triptychs have five or seven carved panels in alabaster, that in the middle being always the tallest. From triptychs which are still intact, we can reconstruct in imagination many others which have lost their mountings. Even in England, several churches possess series of five tables, but their wooden frames have all disappeared, and this is also usually the case abroad.

In this analysis of the subject, I propose to give but one example of each type, and to confine myself to complete wholes which have survived entire in their original frames.

The simplest type is that illustrated by the triptych of Montréal¹ (Yonne) (plate 1). The middle frame encloses three alabaster panels, each surmounted by an independent open-worked canopy. The height of the central panel, excluding its canopy, is greater than that of the ordinary panels by the height of the canopies of the latter. Explanatory inscriptions are painted on the bottom rail of the framing and of the shutters. Each of the shutters includes a panel and the statue of a saint, each of which is surmounted by a canopy, all in alabaster. In the present example the triptych has been recently converted into a fixed reredos. On each side a board has been nailed above the flanking canopies, and the space thus occupied was undoubtedly once decorated with a carved cresting as in the large reredos at La Celle (plate VIII). The uprights which separate the panels are decorated with painted or gilded bands, ornamented with foliage in raised gesso-work. The subjects of the reredos are devoted to the life of the Virgin (the Annunciation, the Adoration of the Three Kings, the Assumption and the Coronation) and to the Holy Eucharist as the central panel with statues of St. Stephen and St. Laurence at each end. The ordinary subjects need not detain us here. The only panel at all out of the common is that which represents the Mass of St. Gregory. Here we see the pope attended by two cardinals, one bearing the tiara, the other the sceptre: a tonsured acolyte bears a lighted taper, and lifts the chasuble as the pontiff elevates

¹ Now fixed in the north wall of the quire of the church.

the Host, when Christ appears, with His mantle drawn back by two angels, and displays His wounds. Upon the altar stand the chalice, the gospels and a candle, while in a niche at the end are the two cruets (plate iv, no. 1).

A few words may be added here in description of the painted decoration of the panels and statues of this reredos, for it is unusually well preserved, and presents a manner which is strikingly characteristic of a very large number of these alabasters. In the panels, the ground is painted green, with flowers of five or six white petals around a red centre. The upper backgrounds are gilded, with flowers of six petals, raised in gesso and gilded. The hair and beards of the Divine personages, the hair of the Virgin, and the crowns are gilded, and gold is also freely used on the vestments. The aureoles generally are red with a pattern in white, or red, and blue. The great aureole around the figure of the Virgin in the Assumption panel shows an indented pattern in blue, and the inside of the Virgin's robe is also blue. Angels' wings show gilded feathers, and the inner sides of the wings are painted red. In the panel which represents the Adoration of the Three Kings, their beards are red and blue, and one of the animals is painted red and the other blue. The statues of St. Stephen and St. Laurence have their hair and parts of their vestments gilded, with red fringes, and the books which they hold are diapered in red.

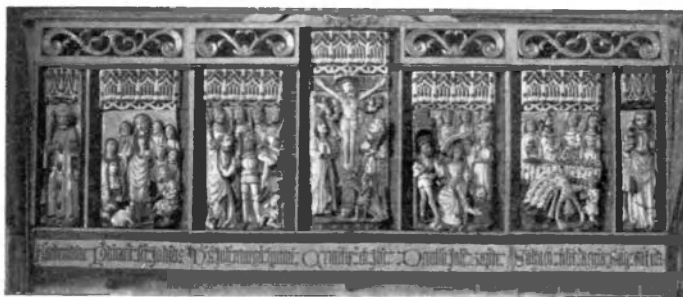
To the same type of triptych belongs that in St. Catharine's church at Venice. Its poor state of preservation (plate 11) is interesting as showing the details of construction, the hinges and the method of fixing the alabasters.¹

The decoration is similar to that of the reredos of Montréal (plate 1): alternate bands of painted and gilded gesso adorn the uprights and even form a band above the painted inscriptions.

The iconography of this triptych is curious. In the first panel St. Catherine, before the emperor Maximian, is telling on her fingers the arguments which make her

¹ This example is also interesting from another point of view. A triptych dedicated to St. Catharine might very well have found its way by accident into a Venetian church, but its presence in St. Catherine's

church cannot be fortuitous. It is curious to think that Venetian churchwardens, in the full flush of the *quattrocento* must have placed their order in England.



NO. 1. TRIPTYCH AT YSSAC-LA-TOURETTE (PUY-DE-DOME),
WITH SCENES FROM THE LIFE OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST.



NO. 2. TRIPTYCH AT YSSAC-LA-TOURETTE (PUY-DE-DOME),
WITH SCENES OF THE PASSION.



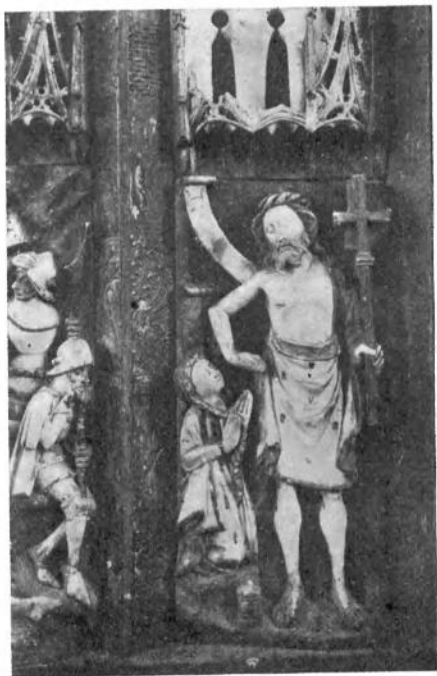
NO. 3. TRIPTYCH AT ECAQUELON (CALVADOS), WITH SCENES OF THE PASSION.



NO. 1. MONTREAL (YONNE), MIDDLE
PANEL REPRESENTING THE MASS OF
ST. GREGORY.



NO. 2. ECAQUELON (CALVADOS),
THE FLAGELLATION.



[*P. Biver, phot.*]

NO. 3. ECAQUELON (CALVADOS),
THE APPEARANCE TO THE MAGDALENE.

disbelieve the gods: the pagan sophists of Alexandria, summoned to convict her of imposture, converted by her words, are dying amid the flames kindled by their executioners, while angels bear their martyred souls to heaven.¹ The following scene represents St. Catherine in prison: the empress Faustina, followed by Porphyry, comes to visit her. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Christ and the angels, the saint speaks so persuasively that the empress and her officer join their hands, converted.² The central panel depicts the saint's martyrdom: she was about to be broken on the wheel, when God and the angels appear and break the wheels, which fly in pieces and kill the executioners. In the fourth panel we see the saint and her followers decapitated in the presence of Maximian.³ The sixth episode is the translation of her body to Mount Sinai. Angels deposit their precious burden, wrapped in silken stuff, in its new resting place, while from the spot gush two fountains of miraculous oil, which two small angels are drawing. At the ends are St. Mary Magdalene and St. Dorothy.

On the upper part of the right-hand shutter can still be seen traces of the original foliated cresting. This was the most fragile part of the triptych, and at the renaissance they were replaced by more vigorous scroll-work. As examples of this we may instance the triptychs of Yssac-la-Tourette (Puy-de-Dôme) (plate III, nos. 1 and 2) the first of which is dedicated to St. John the Baptist, and follows the same type as those described above.

Frequently triptychs have a more important character than those represented by the foregoing types. Although they may still have only five alabaster panels and two saints (reliefs or statuettes) at the extremities, yet they may possess, instead of simple uprights, stages of small figures. Such is the case in a second example from Yssac-la-Tourette, dedicated to the Passion (plate III, no. 2). Here twelve small saints, each with its canopy carved from a single piece of alabaster, add a note of greater richness. The added renaissance frieze is gracefully decorated with shields, dragons, lions, and masks with foliage.

¹ A similar panel is in the Rouen museum.

² A panel representing the same subject is in the possession of the Society of Antiquaries of London.

³ For another in the museum of the Architectural Association, see plate facing p. 90.

Sometimes the terminal figures of saints are replaced by entire scenes : an example will be found in the triptych of Ecaquelon (Calvados) (plate III, no. 3) also dedicated to the Passion. As at Yssac, we see the Betrayal, the Scourging, the Crucifixion, the Entombment, and the Resurrection ; but instead of figures of St. Peter and St. Paul at the extremities, we have the Agony in the garden, and the Appearance to the Magdalene (plate IV, no. 3). These lateral panels are narrower than the rest. I have taken the example from Ecaquelon because of its unusual arrangement. The uprights of the middle frame have flat surfaces upon which are placed foliage and sheets of glass alternately. Under the glass are exquisite painted figures on gold back grounds, saints, angels, and the Virgin of the Annunciation.

At Ecaquelon the terminal scenes are of less width than the others, but this is not invariably the case : in the triptych dedicated to the Passion, now in the Naples museum, they are of the same size as the remainder.

However, all reredoses with five or seven panels are not necessarily triptychs. Just as there are reredoses with two series of panels, one above the other, so there are some with one series only.

As an instance I may refer to the reredos dedicated to the Passion in the ducal palace of Ferrara : whatever alterations the wood-work of this example may have suffered, it can never have been a triptych, since the central panel rests upon a polygonal battlemented base of considerable projection.

Another reredos, that of Saint-Avit-les-Guespières (Sarthe) dedicated to the Passion (plates V and VI, no. 1), has suffered much : the Crucifixion, St. Paul and St. John have lost their canopies, and have been raised to allow of the introduction of a tabernacle, and all the remaining canopies have been replaced upside down : yet we can see that this was never a triptych, for the uprights still remain and show that originally panels and saints were placed alternately.

Before I close, I would say a word on the subjects of all these triptychs. The most popular theme was the Passion : the life of the Virgin is also often met with : now and then we meet with the life of a saint, as in the case of St. Catherine. A few still survive dedicated to



NO. 1. REREDOS AT SAINT-AVIT-LES-GUESPIERES, WITH SCENES OF THE PASSION, LEFT SIDE.



NO. 2. SAINT-AVIT-LES-GUESPIERES, RIGHT SIDE.



NO. I. SAINT-AVIT-LES-GUESPIERES,
MIDDLE PANEL.



[*P. Biver, phot.*

NO. 2. CLUNY MUSEUM, PART OF A LAST JUDGMENT,
THE GOOD RISING FROM THEIR GRAVES.

biblical subjects, but they were never common, and I am unable to cite a single perfect example. On them were represented the parables, or episodes in the Last Judgment. The latter are fairly frequent (plate VI, no. 2). To serve as a central panel, these triptychs sometimes have a tree of Jesse, which shows all the episodes of the Old Testament prefiguring and finding their culmination in the Virgin and Christ, as in the fine example from Vernon (Eure) (plate VII).

II. AN ENGLISH ALABASTER REREDOS AT LA CELLE (EURE.)

The parish church of La Celle, in Juignettes (Eure), France, which contains this reredos, is very poor and badly kept, mass being only celebrated once or twice in the year.

Behind the altar is a large decorative baldachino in the classical style of seventeenth-century peasants' work, with massive saints roughly carved, and painted in glaring colours. On the altar, a tabernacle and two coarsely-modelled wooden figures partly screen a lovely series of panels in English alabaster work. These panels are framed in ancient woodwork, many fragments of which are scattered all over the church and sacristy, where they are put to various uses. The tabernacle itself is made with piers and cornices painted and detached from the reredos. I have discovered in the church four large wooden panels, painted on both sides, in a more or less good state of preservation, which were certainly the moveable shutters of the reredos. I have also found, hidden probably for centuries, and used as material to support the baldachino, a complete set of wooden panels finely decorated with the linen pattern and tracery-work dating from the year 1500 or thereabouts. These two must have come with the reredos, or were made perhaps to enrich the altar and quire with woodwork worthy of the rich artistic alabaster placed on the high altar.

The reredos has suffered greatly, having lost part of

its wooden framing : the shutters also are gone, and one of the alabaster panels has disappeared. What remains is covered with dust and cobwebs, and the damp has decomposed some of the colours : for instance the green has changed into a light blue, and several panels are covered with green mould.

The woodwork has further been much damaged by worms. But this natural decay is better than an unhappy restoration : nothing has been altered or painted anew. The bright colouring, the brilliant gilding, even the old Latin inscriptions are intact, and the general aspect is very rich.

The chief iconographic theme is the life of St. George and that of Our Lady. The life of St. George comprises six panels ; the life of Our Lady was formerly represented by eight, seven of which remain. The two sets of panels are superposed and the life of the saint is placed above the scenes relating to the life of St. Mary. We may infer from this that St. George was the patron saint of the church (plate viii).

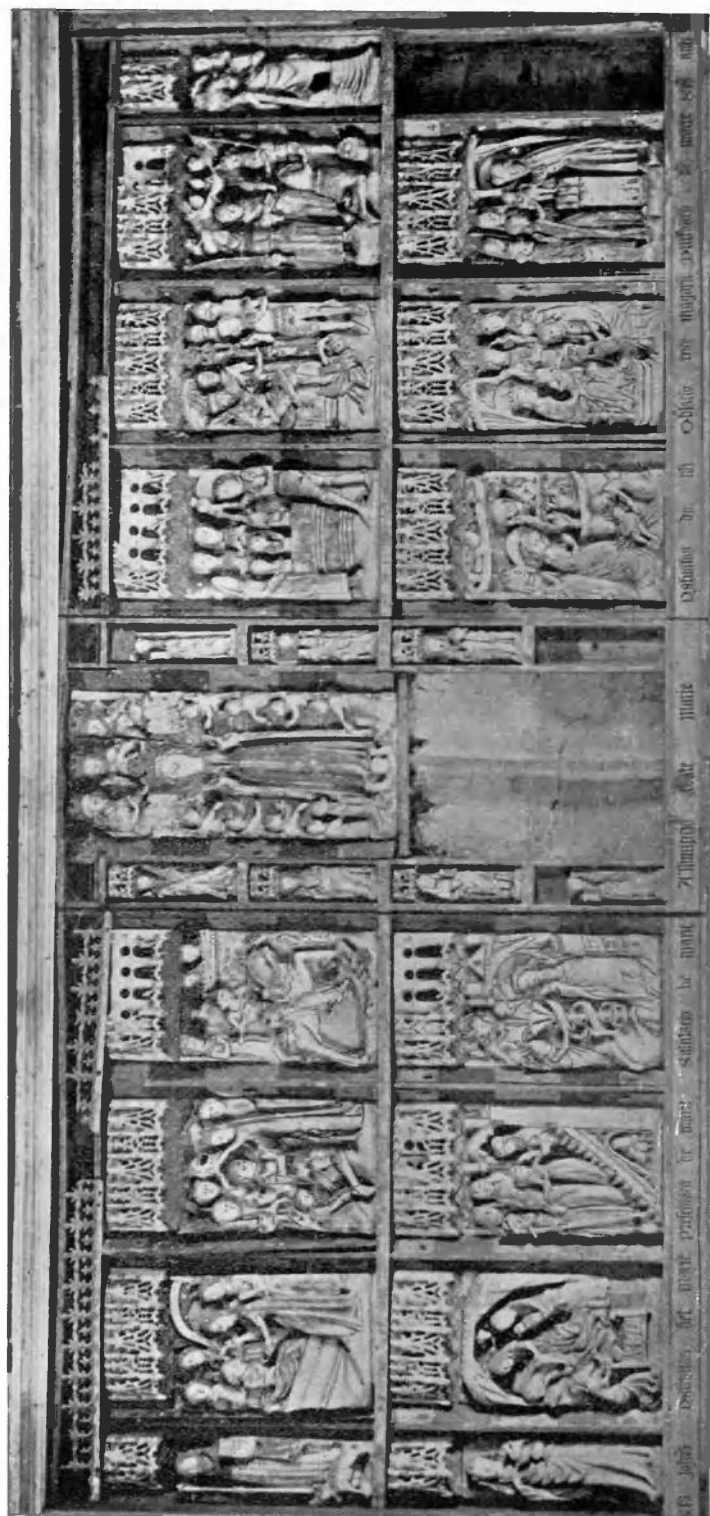
The principal object of the artist seems to have been an exaltation of purity : in both lives he has neglected the numerous sorrowful scenes, applying himself to the rendering of a peaceful and heavenly atmosphere. It is an almost unique example of such a conception ; for these modest artists generally delight in reproducing the scenes of the Passion in panels which exaggerate the brutish expression of the tormentors and soldiers, and seek to inspire horror by the flowing wounds of the Saviour and the pitiful aspect of His torn body.

The subjects of the two first panels are difficult to determine : no iconographic source I know of gives me any clue to their meaning, and I would invite my English readers, more familiar with the mediaeval mystery-plays of their own country, to throw some light upon the matter. The first panel represents St. George being brought back to life by the Virgin (plate ix, no. 1). Mary utters a few words which were formerly painted on a scroll issuing from her right hand. She gives her blessing to the young man and holds out to him a helping hand, while he, with a dazed look on his thin face, rises naked from the shroud : it is an exquisite scene, and three angels naïvely express



[P. Bivèr, phot.]

VERNON (EURE), ALABASTER TABLE REPRESENTING THE TREE OF JESSE.



[P. Biear, phot.]

LA CELLE (EURE), KEREDOS REPRESENTING SCENES FROM THE LIFE OF ST. GEORGE AND OUR LADY.

their astonishment and admiration.¹ In the second panel Mary intends to make a valiant and ideal warrior of the young man rescued from death. St. George kneels before the Virgin who, aided by an angel, sets a helmet upon his head; another angel carries a shield, a third bears a lance, while a fourth angel buckles on the spurs (plate ix, no. 2). The scene reminds one of the heroic tales of the Round Table: the knight departing for an expedition and armed by his lady. But for this knight, in whom the Church recognises the saint *Vexillifer*, the lady is Our Lady. An explanation of these curious scenes can perhaps be found in some old English tradition: maybe the author of a mystery imagined a prologue to the life of the saint, symbolising by the resurrection of St. George and his equipment by the Virgin the state of his soul reclaimed by her from the darkness of error and rendered fit for the battle against evil. Beneath the panel is painted the inscription: *Virg. sca. Maria armatat Georgium.*

The third panel is a true illustration of the life of St. George as related in the Golden Legend: St. George came originally from Cappadocia and served as an officer in the Roman army. During a voyage, he passed by chance near a city called Silene. Outside the gates there was a pond infested by a dragon whose breath was deadly to all who came within its range. The inhabitants greatly feared this dragon and offered him every day two sheep to appease his wrath and appetite. But soon the number of the sheep not yet killed dwindled so fast that the citizens were obliged to sacrifice only one and to replace the other by a human victim. Lots were drawn among the young men and maidens, and no family was excepted from the horrible choice. Nearly all the young people had already been devoured when St. George arrived. That same day the lot had fallen upon the king's only daughter. Nothing could save her, and after a week's delay, she walked towards the pond under the saddened eyes of all the people. St. George passing by, met the princess, and seeing her tears, wished to know what caused them. "Young man," answered she, "I believe that thou hast a noble and great

¹ The resurrection of St. George, the details of which are unknown to the continental history of art, has often been

illustrated in English sculptures and drawings.

heart, but, I pray thee, haste to depart from hence." But St. George said, "I shall not leave until thou hast told me wherefore thou grievest;" and when she had told him all St. George said, "Fear not, for I will help thee in the name of Jesus Christ." At this moment the dragon appeared above the waters, but St. George, crossing himself, directed his horse towards it and inwardly invoking the help of the Lord wielded his spear with such strength that one blow sufficed to overcome the monster. Such is the scene represented by the third panel (plate x, no. 1): St. George runs his spear through a curiously-modelled dragon which looks anything but real. Behind the saint is the princess in an attitude of supplication, and above her the lamb that was part of the daily oblation, according to the legend. On the summit of a tower the king and queen anxiously witness the struggle.

"Then the king and all his people were baptised. Twenty-five thousand men and a great many women and children were baptised on that same day." This memorable event is naïvely illustrated on the fourth panel. St. George pours the contents of a vessel over the heads of the king, the queen and the princess, very much reduced from the natural size, standing in a tub or font. A maid assists them, and two personages bear their crowns.

"In these days under the empire of Diocletian and Maximian's reign the perfect Dacianus opened a violent persecution against the Christians. . . . St. George was also brought before him and being questioned answered: 'I am called George, and am descended from a noble family of Cappadocia. With the help of God I have fought in Palestine. Now, however, I have renounced 'the world in order to serve the Lord more freely.'" In this fifth panel the artist shows us the saint clad in armour, whereas the text distinctly declares: ". . . and George laid aside his warrior garb to assume the cloak of the christians." The curious figures of the idol on the column and the jester trodden under foot by the cruel prefect should be noticed, also the evil spirit on the prefect's turban, and the notary who stands by. Behind St. George are two guards in armour (plate x, no. 2).

In the sixth panel the saint has just been beheaded. The cruel Dacianus, sword in hand, converses with the



[P. Biver, phot.]

NO. I. LA CELLE, THE RESURRECTION OF ST. GEORGE.

To face page 74.



PLATE IX.

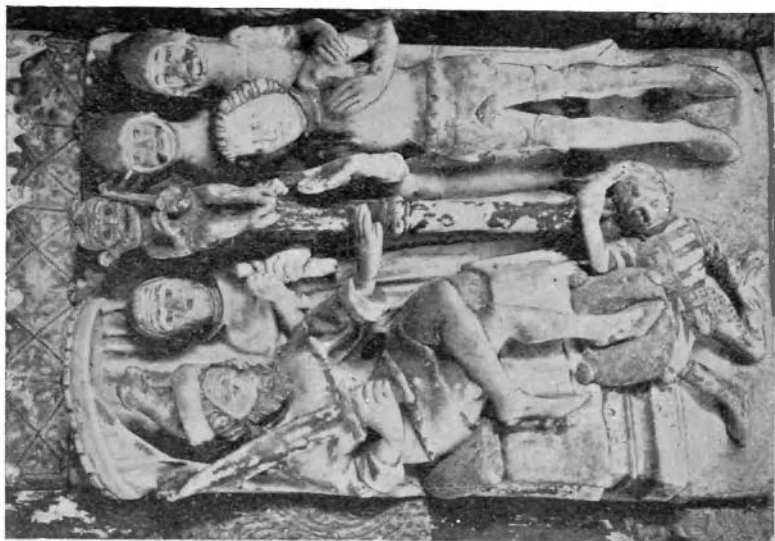
[P. Biver, phot.]

NO. 2. LA CELLE, ST. GEORGE BEING ARMED BY THE VIRGIN.



[P. Biver, phot.]

NO. 1. LA CELLE, ST. GEORGE AND THE DRAGON.



[P. Biver, phot.]

NO. 2. LA CELLE, ST. GEORGE BEFORE DACIANUS.

notary : the kneeling body of the saint, though headless, seems to pray, while two angels carry up his soul to heaven. The headsman stands behind.

The life of the Virgin does not sensibly differ from the ordinary tradition. In the first panel St. Anne is shown lying in a bed, from the canopy of which hangs a lamp : an attendant is covering up St. Anne, while another woman is holding the infant Mary, who is wrapped in swaddling clothes and about to be laid in a cradle which is being kept steady by Joachim. Beneath the panel is the inscription : *Natiuitas bte. Marie.*

The second panel depicts the presentation of Mary in the temple (plate xi, no. 1). "When the child was three year old she was conducted to the temple . . . there were fifteen steps leading to it corresponding to the fifteen gradual psalms. And lo ! the child ascended all these steps without any help whatever." The artist has respected the tradition as far as the fifteen steps are concerned, but has taken the liberty of showing Mary being assisted up the stair by her mother, who is followed by Joachim and two maidens. There are two naïve details, the man, very small, telling his beads under the stairs and the high priest who comes to receive Mary, and is so curiously placed behind the topmost steps. The inscription beneath is : *Presentatio bte. Marie.*

The Annunciation, or rather *Salutatio bte. Marie*, as the inscription says, occupies the next panel (plate xi, no. 2). A favourite with christian art, this scene has had many different interpretations. Particularly as regards the Virgin are the artists at variance, although they ever follow tradition. These attitudes express either astonishment, terror or acceptance : the English alabastermen have chosen this first interpretation : better than any school have they succeeded in their exaltation of the purity of Mary, figured by the tree-like lily blooming at her side. Around the lily is entwined a scroll which once, no doubt, bore the message conveyed by the archangel who kneels behind. Above is a majestic figure of God the Father, from whom issues the Holy Spirit in likeness of a dove.

The third panel represents the Nativity of Our Lord : the sculptor here strictly conforms to the account in the Golden Legend. We see the two midwives and the ox and

the ass, as Jacob de Voragine will have it : Joseph brought the ox in order to pay the tribute and the ass served as a mount for the Virgin. Owing to the mystery plays this legend reappeared in art towards 1380. It is a pity that the legend ever escaped oblivion. Neither Greban nor Jean Michel makes any mention of it, but it is consigned in the "Gospel of the nativity of Mary and infancy of the Saviour" (apocryphal). "And Joseph said to Mary 'I have brought thee two midwives, Zelami and Salome.'" Then follows the relation of Salome's incredulity in Mary's virginity, and how, as a punishment, her hand withered away.

Her contrition followed. "A young man of great beauty appeared to her and said, 'adore the child and touch him with thy hands and thou shalt be made whole.'" And Salome obeyed and was healed. The alabastermen have carefully noted down these details : an angel comes down from heaven, holding a scroll on which is written the counsel given to Salome, and Salome touches the child's swaddling clothes.

Then comes the Adoration of the wise men of the East, very like the usual reproduction of the theme : Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar offer their gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the child. Two of them speak of the star, pointing to it with the finger. The Virgin is enthroned as Queen-Mother.

The sixth panel represents the Purification of the Virgin. According to tradition, St. Joseph holds in a basket two turtle-doves, but the artist naïvely mixes dates, modernising the scene, as it were, by placing a candle in the hand of the two assistants, for is not the 2nd February Candlemas ?

The central panel of the lower row is now missing. The gothic inscription which remains, indicates that it represents the Assumption of the Virgin into heaven. It was doubtless treated in the same way as the rare specimens known of the Assumption by alabastermen : Mary awakes in her tomb surrounded by angels and a luminous cloud hides her glorious body from the apostles.

The centre panel above shows us the Coronation of the Virgin, or rather her Assumption *and* Coronation according to the conception of the alabastermen of the



NO. I. LA CELLE, THE PRESENTATION OF MARY.



[P. Biver, phot.]

NO. 2. LA CELLE, THE ANNUNCIATION.



[P. Biver, phot.]

LA CELLE, ORIGINAL PAINTED SHUTTER OF REREDOS.

fifteenth century. Here Mary stands with uplifted hands, symbol of adoration, and receives from the Trinity a triple crown, very like the papal tiara which only English artists have given to the Virgin. On her right side is a small figure of St. Thomas receiving the Virgin's girdle. "As Thomas, not present at the Assumption, refused to believe the miracle had taken place, the girdle which encircled Our Lady's waist fell from Heaven, intact, into his hands, to make him understand that the Virgin's body had been carried up intact to Heaven." This legend always appealed to the imagination of the people, although St. Jerome evidently disapproved of it in his letter to Paula and Eustochia.

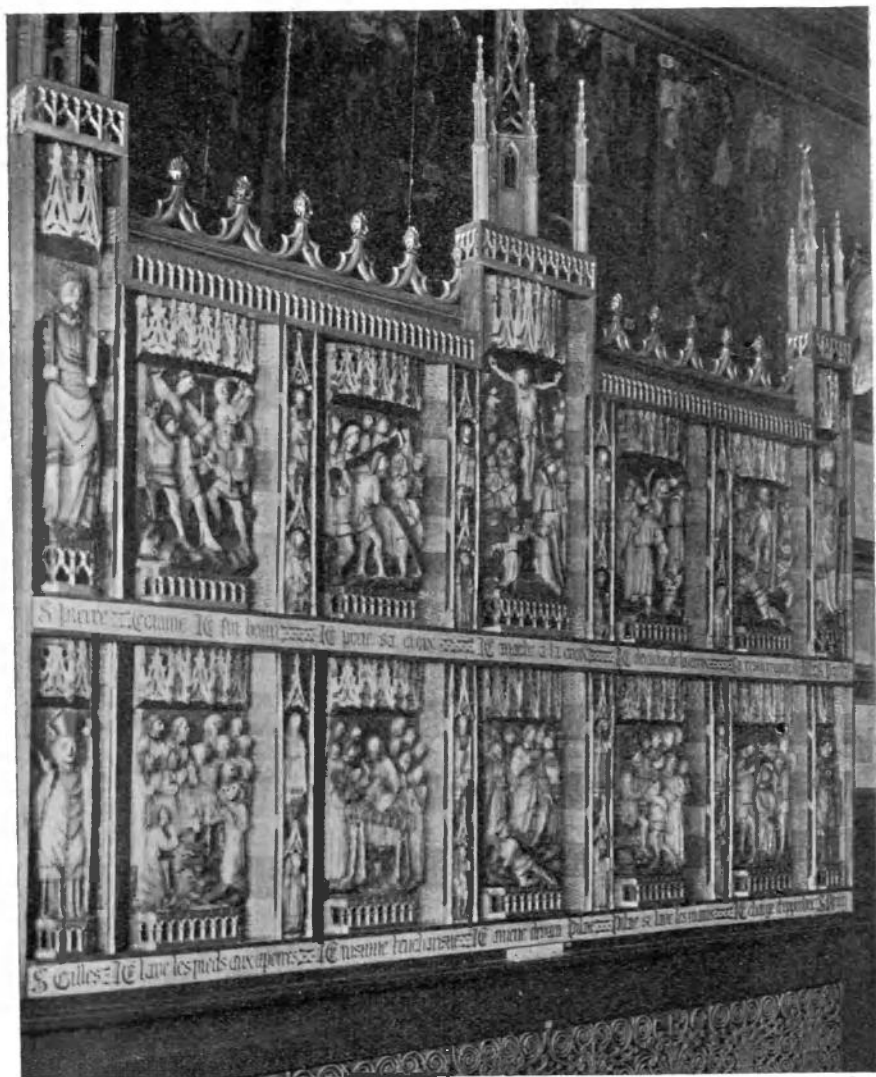
Several statues of saints with their ordinary attributes adorn both extremities of the reredos, St. Christopher, St. Anthony and St. John. That of St. John the Baptist has been stolen. These statues are surmounted by canopy-work cut out of detached blocks of alabaster painted and gilt. The disposition is the same over the panels. On either side of the central panels are some small statuettes of saints, but the canopy-work is of a piece with the saints. These statues do not make a happy effect, and I much prefer, as a frame, painted saints on a gold background under a glass, such as I have seen in other reredoses. The wood-work is not remarkable, and similar to many others: a painted floral decoration alternates with gilt gadrooned surfaces. A small head in the O of the inscription *Oblatio trium Magium* should be observed. I have seen several instances of these heads; they are possibly a trade-mark.

It would be difficult to determine the date of the reredos, were it not for the painted shutters. Several of the paintings are well preserved, but the artist's palette boasts of two colours only: grey and pink, the latter for flesh-tints, the former for the raiment. Two scenes of the Passion, Christ before Caiaphas, and Christ laden with the cross, owing to the costumes of the personages, allow us to place the date of the reredos under the reign of our Henry VIII. Another of these panels represents the Last Judgment, so frequently illustrated in catholic iconography, and offers a few interesting details (plate XII). The obscure illuminator employed in the making of the reredos has shown a complete lack of intelligence and has

certainly misunderstood the subject : Christ surrounded by rose-coloured angels and seated on a rainbow, His feet resting on the globe of the universe, lifts up His right hand in blessing, while the other hand expresses a curse or condemnation. On His right side is the Virgin, on the left St. John the Baptist, both kneeling upon clouds. Lower down an angel sounds a trumpet and the dead rise from the fissures in the ground. The expression of Christ's hands is indicative of the end of the middle ages. On the contrary, the kneeling figures of the Virgin and St. John the Baptist belong to a more ancient period. There is no plausible explanation of the presence of St. John the Baptist in the painting. According to Honorius of Autun, Mary and St. John the Evangelist were carried to Heaven with their bodies ; therefore it was natural to represent them already in heaven before the Resurrection. Their kneeling attitude is easy to account for : Christ's mother and his favourite disciple are the creatures most beloved by Our Saviour and their intercession must needs be all-powerful. But the artist evidently did not reflect very deeply upon the subject : otherwise he would not have made the mistake of replacing St. John by St. John the Baptist. In German iconography it happens that in a judgment scene, St. John the Baptist is represented, but never as a suppliant. He points to Our Lord as if to say "Hic est Agnus Dei." It should be observed that the dead rise from the ground as in the "mysteries" and not from tombs as in the middle ages.

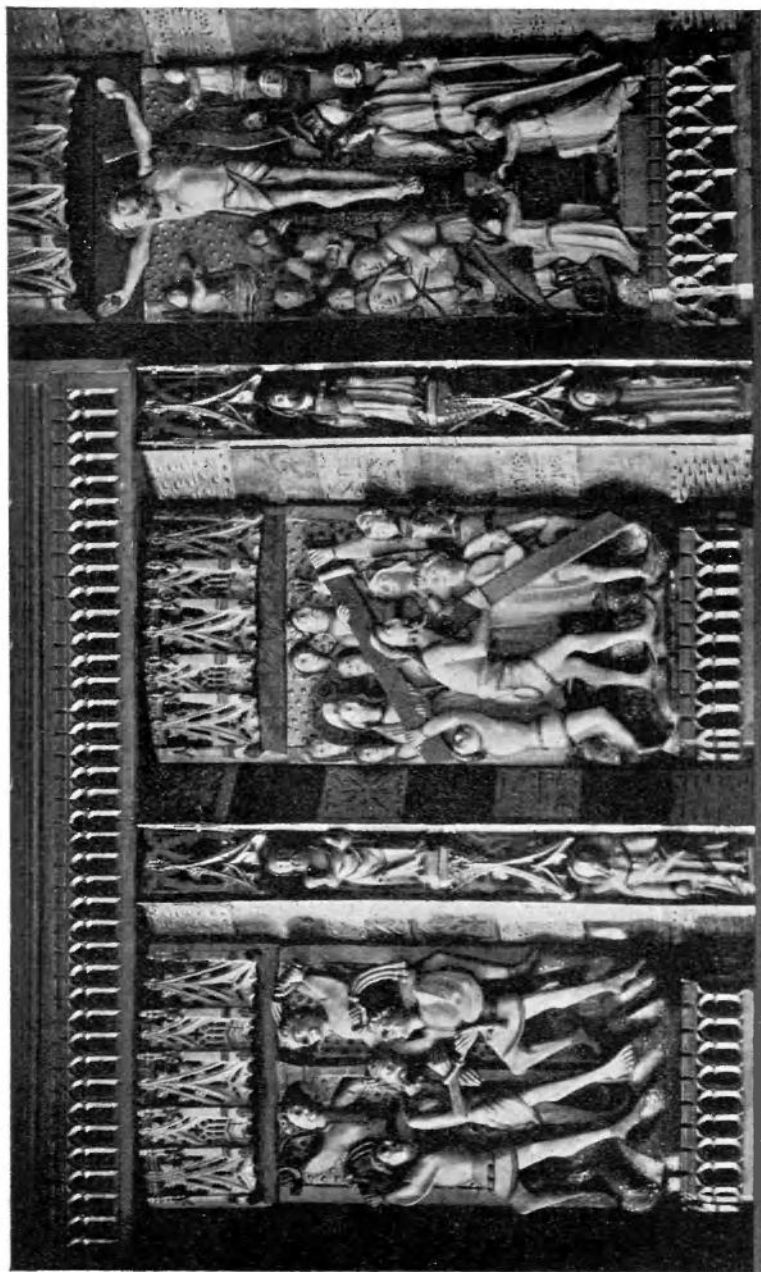
In short, this reredos is a more or less happy illustration of old legends such as were told under Henry VIII, and from time immemorial.

We are ignorant of its exact origin : whether it comes from Nottinghamshire or Yorkshire is uncertain, and any assertion would seem to me rather venturesome ; however, it is hardly likely that it was ordered by the poor parish of La Celle. Perhaps in better days it adorned an English church when the Virgin and St. George were honoured as patrons. Maybe it was sold at the time of the Reformation, when England voluntarily deprived herself of such lovely ornaments due to the naïve piety and talent of the faithful, evidently preferring the severe orthodoxy of bare walls to lessons always edifying and moral, but some-



[P. Biver, phot.]

COMPIÈGNE (OISE), GENERAL VIEW OF REREDOS, SHOWING ORIGINAL PAINTED
WOODEN SHUTTERS ABOVE.



[P. Biver, phot.]

ALABASTER REREDOS AT COMPIÈGNE, LEFT HAND SIDE, UPPER PART.

times embellished by popular imagination, which emanate from such works of art as the reredos I have tried to describe.

III. AN ENGLISH ALABASTER REREDOS OF THE PASSION NOW AT COMPIEGNE (OISE).

Among the numerous objects of ancient art that Vivenel bequeathed to his native town, Compiègne, towards the middle of the last century, is a large alabaster reredos illustrating scenes from the Passion¹ (plates XIII, XIV, xv). This was formerly placed over an altar in the church of Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois, in Paris, where several French and Flemish reredoses are still to be seen. The date of its erection and of its removal are alike unknown. It may have been sold, or perhaps stolen, either at the Revolution or in 1832, and Vivenel has left no evidence on this point.

The reredos appears to date from the end of the fifteenth century, and resembles in many respects that at La Celle (plate VIII), which is somewhat later in date. That at Compiègne is more complete. All its panels and all its statues remain, but unfortunately its wood-work and its colouring have been restored. It consists of two stages, each of five panels²: at each end of each stage is the figure of a saint, and between each of the panels are pairs of statues one above the other.

The wood-work is original, with the exception of that which forms the finish of the upper part. It seems that in the last century the rectangular top rails were thought to be unsatisfactory without their crestings, and the panelled frieze, the crestings and the three pinnacles were added: but these clumsy additions can easily be recognised even in the illustrations.

In addition four painted wooden panels remain, somewhat similar to those at La Celle: they are the

¹ It is in the Musée Vivenel, Hôtel-de-Ville, Compiègne, in the large room on the first floor.

² The panels measure about 15 by 10 inches each, exclusive of the canopies, which are worked out of separate stones.

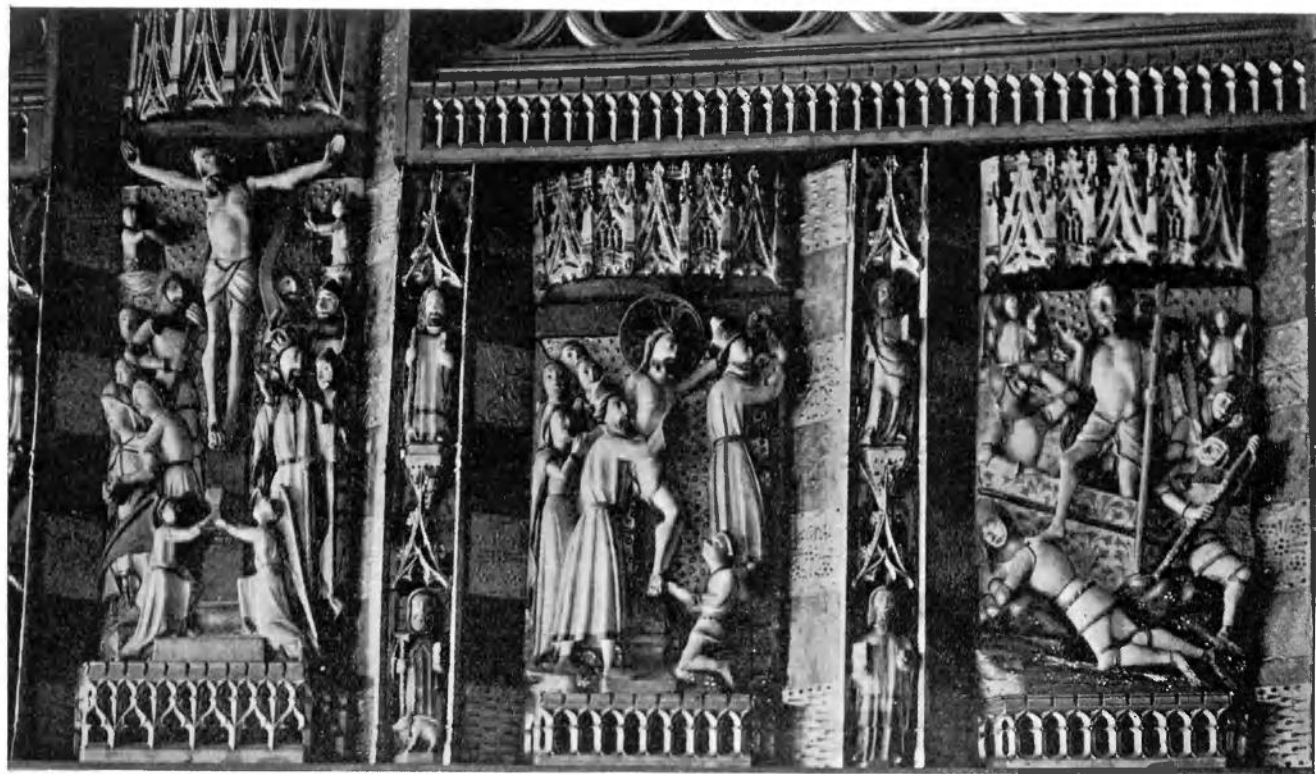
fragments of the shutters which protected the reredos. The inscriptions, which are in French, have been repainted, and they have retained their ancient appearance. The wood-work retains its gesso-work, and the uprights are still decorated alternately with painted foliage and diapers of gilded gesso. The traceried canopies, above both panels and statues, are alabaster, but the pedestals on which the panels stand are of gilded wood. There is nothing in this that need cause surprise, for, from the beginning, the tendency was to use wood more and more in panelled alabaster reredoses. In the fourteenth century, canopy, base, and uprights were all of alabaster. At the commencement of the fifteenth century wood replaced alabaster in the uprights: at its close the bases, as here, were generally wood: wooden canopies appear sometimes under Henry VIII: and finally, in those rare and precious monuments executed during the reign of queen Mary, by the English alabastermen, bases, uprights and canopies, are all of wood.¹

As a rule the alabaster panels have preserved their pastilles of gesso, regularly applied over a gilded background, as well as those which, on the ground, represent a flowery field.

The first panel of the lower row portrays Christ washing the apostles' feet (plate xvi, no. 1). *À C labe les pieds aux apotres.* This is a scene but rarely represented by the alabastermen. Christ upon his knees is washing one of Peter's feet in a small tub: the latter is seated on a stool with his legs crossed: all the disciples are watching attentively, with hands joined.

The second panel (plate xvi, no. 2), represents the Last Supper: *À C institue l'eucharistie.* In the foreground is a table on trestles, covered with a cloth and bearing six small loaves, three of which are on a dish, and also a cup, held by one of the apostles. John, kneeling, reposes on the bosom of Our Lord. The other disciples are listening to His words, as with raised forefinger He unveils the mystery of the Eucharist. This panel owes its interest in a great measure to the stage which the meal has reached. It is at its

¹ As for example those of the exquisite alabaster Virgin in the Rouen museum.



ALABASTER REREDOS AT COMPIÈGNE, RIGHT HAND SIDE, UPPER PART.

[P. Biver, phot.]



[P. Biver, phot.]

NO. I. COMPIÈGNE, CHRIST WASHING THE DISCIPLES' FEET.



[P. Biver, phot.]

NO. 2. COMPIÈGNE, THE LAST SUPPER.

commencement, and as the inscription below indicates, Jesus is giving to His disciples preliminary instruction upon the miracle about to be performed. He is about to consecrate the bread and wine. Alabaster tables, as a rule, represent the Last Supper as already commenced, and the apostles as sharing by means of meat and drink in the body and blood of the Master. Often, also, by the presence of the purse, it is possible to distinguish Judas from the rest of the disciples.

J C amene debant Pilate. In this third panel (plate XIII) we find the usual iconography: Christ is being kissed by the traitor,¹ and seized by one of the soldiers. Peter replaces his sword in its sheath and Malchus touches the ear which the miracle of Christ has just replaced.

In the fourth panel Pilate is washing his hands. *Pilate se lave les mains.* Christ, whose arms are bound, held by two men, gazes on the governor: the latter, with legs crossed, wears a crown crested with the head of a devil: an attendant holds a bowl and pours over his hands the contents of a jug: among those present we can distinguish the high priest (plate XVII, no. 1).

In the fifth panel we see Christ mocked. *J C charge d'approbre.* Christ is seated with hands bound and eyes bandaged: He is being pulled by the hair and struck by several persons (plate XVII, no 2).

The scenes of the Passion are continued on the upper row of tables. First comes the Scourging (plate XIV): *Comme J C fut battu.* Standing before a column, He is being scourged by four grinning executioners: one holds the cords which tie His hands; another holds Him by the hair.

The bearing of the cross is depicted in the seventh table. *J C porte sa croix.* Christ follows an executioner who holds Him by a rope: two others, one with a hammer, weigh down the bar of the cross, to make the burden greater, while Simon of Cyrene, followed by his son, is endeavouring to help Him. Mary, and the holy women who accompany her, are also trying to raise the cross (plate XIV). In this scene the executioners play the rôle which, in another set of carvings representing the

¹ As M. Male has often shown, the imagers of the end of the middle ages often did nothing but translate graphically the

scenes of the mystery plays. We are reminded of the York Miracle Plays. (MS. Ashburnham).

same subject, the alabastermen have assigned to an imp who either hangs from the cross or gambols upon it.

The eighth panel (plate xiv), which is larger than the others, represents the Crucifixion. *J C attache a la croix*. Christ has already given up the ghost: Longinus has pierced His side, and four angels catch the blood. The centurion bears a scroll, the inscription on which, half effaced, evidently recorded his believing words. Longinus, the soldiers, and the holy women are the spectators of the mournful scene. Mary, supported by one of the women and St. John, turns from it with clenched hands. St. John appears to be uttering words of comfort.

Last but one we have the Descent from the Cross. *J C Detache de la croix*. Joseph of Arimathea and an attendant are unnailing His limbs: Nicodemus supports His body. Mary, followed by three women, seizes and kisses His right hand (plate xv).

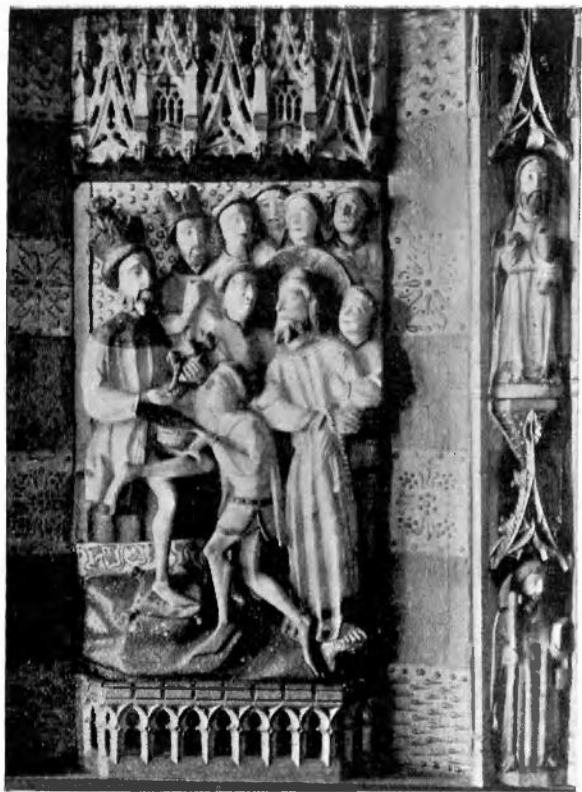
Finally, in the Resurrection panel, *La resurrection de J C*, we find the usual treatment: the four soldiers asleep or just awakening, and, in the sky, four angels who are showing their joy (plate xv).

The large statuettes at each end of the lower stage represent St. Giles and St. Remy, almost identical in treatment: both are in the act of blessing, and wear the mitre, chasuble and pallium: St. Giles holds a cross, St. Remy a book and a crozier.

The corresponding statuettes at each end of the upper stage are St. Peter, with a book, and the keys of heaven; and St. Paul with a book and a sword.

The small figures of saints between the panels of each stage have no emblems by which they can be identified, and several of them are much alike. SS. Longinus, James, John, Andrew, Anthony and Peter can, however, be observed. The last, which is evidently an involuntary replica of the large figure of the chief of the apostles, shows clearly the mechanical and commercial character of their manufacture.

The four shutters, which remain, bear fairly well preserved paintings. They represent: (1) Jesus bound to the column. (2) Jesus falling under the weight of the cross. (3) Jesus delivering the souls in hell. (4) The Last Judgment.



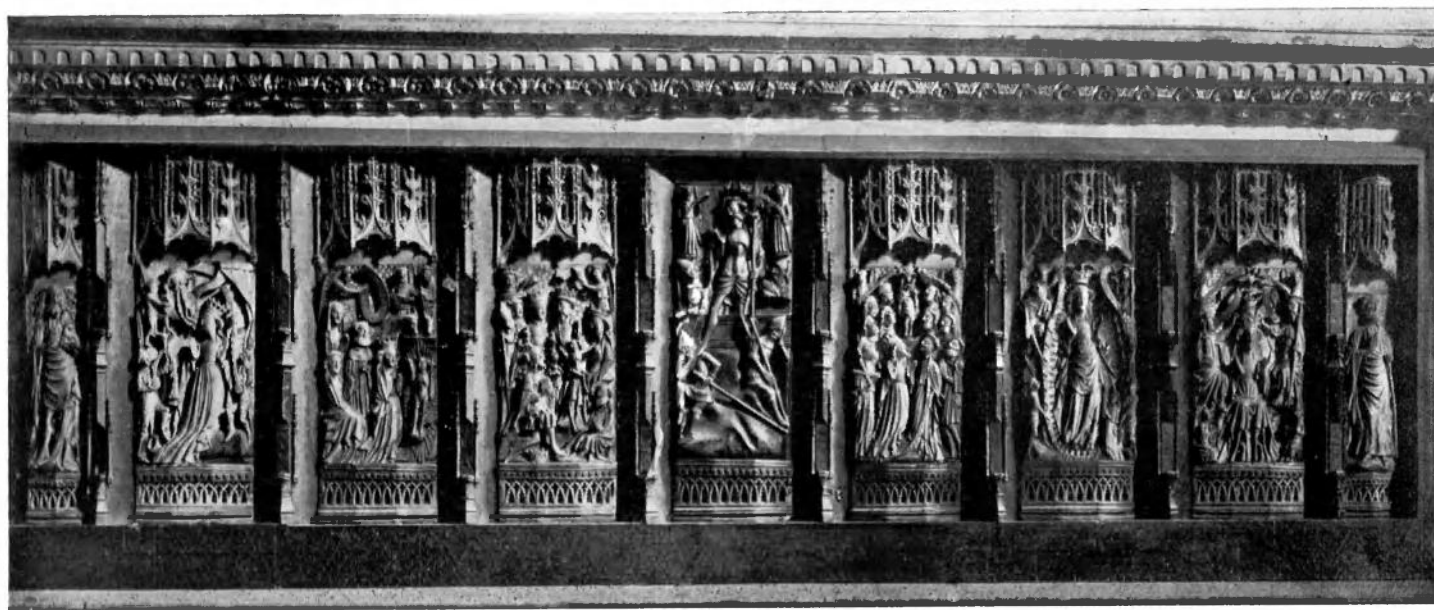
[P. River, phot.]

NO. I. COMPIEGNE, PILATE WASHING HIS HANDS.



[P. Biver, phot.]

NO. 2. COMPIÈGNE, CHRIST MOCKED.



ALABASTER REREDOS IN THE CHAPEL OF ST. JOSEPH, SAINT-MICHEL, BORDEAUX.

[P. Biver, phot.]

The latter painting offers some striking analogies to the portrayal of the same subject on one of the shutters of the reredos at La Celle (plate xii).

In spite of unfortunate restorations, the reredos in the Musée Vivenel at Compiègne stands out among the rare complete sets. Folding triptychs, with alabaster panels, are to be met with fairly often on the continent, but large fixed reredoses are rare.

Nevertheless this reredos, consecrated to the Passion, is far from exhausting the subject. In it the alabaster-men have represented several scenes rarely treated by them: I refer to Christ washing His disciples' feet, and His mocking. On the other hand they have omitted the episode of the healing of Longinus and of Mary weeping over the body of her Son, also the Agony in the Garden, Christ before the high priest, Christ fastened to the cross, and the Descent into hell, all of which are subjects frequently met with in similar alabaster reredoses. In them, after the Resurrection, the story sometimes prolongs itself, and we see Christ appearing to the Magdalene in the guise of a gardener. Strange as it may seem, the Resurrection and the Appearance of Jesus are never followed by the Ascension, which, logically, should complete the circle. This scene is reserved for reredoses which illustrate the life of the Virgin.

IV. REREDOS IN THE CHURCH OF SAINT MICHEL, BORDEAUX.

The French department of the Gironde is one of the richest in the possession of English alabaster sculptures.¹ The factors to which this is due are its occupation by the English and to its sea-borne commerce, which from the middle ages has been very active.

¹ All are illustrated in *Album d'objets* By J. A. Brutails (Société Archæologique de Bordeaux, 1907).
d'art existant dans les églises de la Gironde.

French archaeologists have not always recognized their importance : in some cases want of contact with their colleagues on the other side of the channel has left them ignorant of the real origin of these carvings, and consequently mistakes have been made both as to their dates and attributions.

In the church of Saint Michel, Bordeaux, is a reredos¹ representing the history of the Virgin (plate XVIII). It was formerly in the chapel of St. John, and now in the chapel of St. Joseph.

This reredos, if its upper part had survived, would fit exactly into the stone frame in which it was placed in the nineteenth century. Perhaps the frame, which dates from about the year 1500, of a style essentially French, was made to hold it.

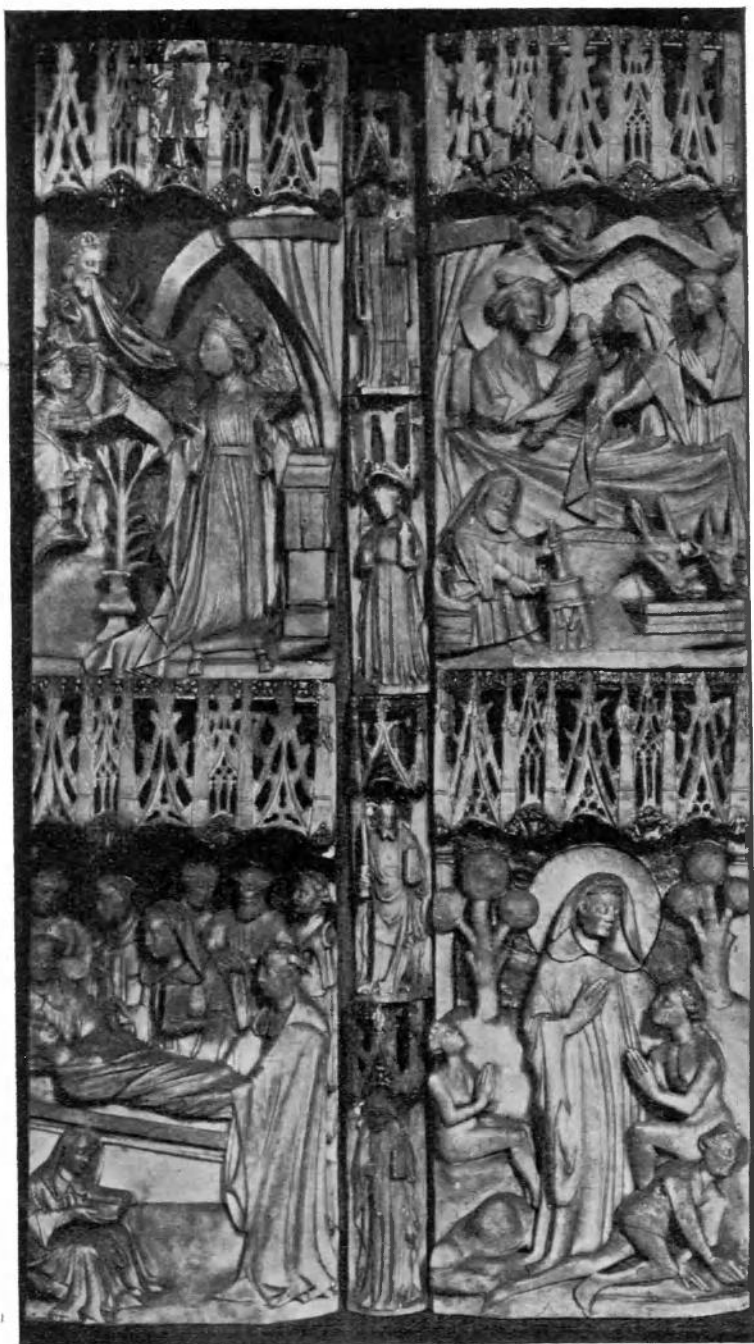
As will be seen from the illustration this reredos has lost the upper part of its wood-work, the alabaster canopy which surmounted the Resurrection, the small figures of saints, placed formerly in the niches, to the number of sixteen, as well as the inscriptions and the other paintings which decorated the wood-work.

What remains is however interesting : the greater part of the wooden framing survives : the panels still retain their pedestals and their canopies, and the painted decoration is visible in many places. The backgrounds are red, flowered with white points ; the ground is dark green with flowers, whose red corollas spring from yellow stems, or which are comprised of red dots surrounded by white ones.

At the two extremities are two statuettes of saints : that on the left is St. John the Baptist, that on the right a bearded man with a staff, the head of which is lost.

The first panel represents the Annunciation, the iconography of which presents a peculiarity not often found in the representations of this scene by the alabaster men. Mary kneels beneath a canopy, with a lily blossoming at her side : God the Father appears and from his mouth the naked figure of the child Jesus issues in a glory downwards towards the Virgin. More frequently in these

¹ Ibid. pl. 25.



[M. l'abbé Chablen, phot.]
ALABASTER REREDOS AT GÈNISSAC (GIRONDE), LEFT HAND PANELS.

alabaster sculptures the Conception is represented by a dove issuing from the mouth of God instead of an infant as here.¹ By the side of God is an angel covered with feathers, holding a scroll. On either side of the Virgin are similar angels censeng.

The second panel represents the Nativity. The child, naked and carrying a globe, is surrounded by a glory : in front are the Virgin, Joseph, and two women in prayer : the ass and the ox eat from the manger : an angel in the sky holds a scroll : two others are singing hymns.

The third panel represents the Adoration of the Three Kings. The Virgin is seated, and with Joseph by her side, the child, quite naked, receives the presents of the three kings, one of whom has taken off his crown and bends on one knee : behind them are two attendants, and, in the background, Herod : above is an angel bearing a scroll.

The Resurrection is of the usual type : here two censeng angels and Christ.

In the Ascension, a small figure of our Lord ascends between two censeng angels : beneath are his disciples and, in the foreground, Mary, St. John, St. James and St. Andrew.

In the Assumption we have the prelude to the Coronation : above the glory which surrounds the Virgin are two small figures of Christ and God the Father, holding scrolls : around the glory are angels clothed in feathers, while beneath them is St. Thomas recovering the loosened girdle.

In the Coronation of the Virgin we see Mary seated between the Father and the Son who are crowning her with a tiara. Above floats the Holy Spirit : at the four corners are angels, censeng or singing.

¹ As in the first panel of the reredos at Montreal (plate i), and in the first panel of that at Genissac (plate xix).

V. AN ALABASTER REREDOS AT GENISSAC, GIRONDE.

Génissac possesses a series of ten panels and sixteen statuettes¹ (plates XIX, XX, XXI). The wood-work has unfortunately disappeared. Five panels are devoted to scenes in the life of Christ, the remainder to that of St. Martin.

The first series consists of :

(1) The Annunciation.

(2) The Nativity, where we see Joseph preparing a dish of food upon a small brazier. Zalamitha and Salome receive the child from the hands of Mary.

(3) The Crucifixion : this example exhibits the transition in the iconography of this subject as treated in alabaster, and stands midway between the iconography of the fourteenth century and the iconography which was current up to the time of the Reformation. In this one, Christ still lives : St. Mary and St. John listen reverently to his last words : at the foot of the cross lies the skull of Adam, while three small angels catch the blood of Christ in a chalice.

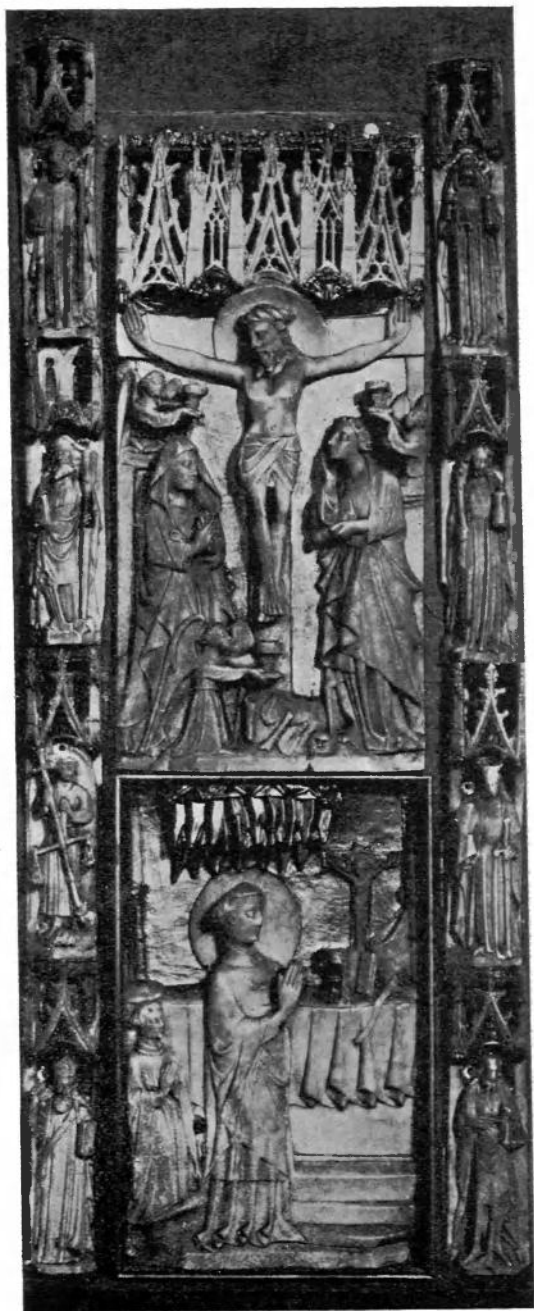
(4) The Resurrection.

(5) The Ascension. Mary kneels upon a small cushion : behind her is St. Peter with the key of paradise : in front St. John and St. James : in a second and third row are the remaining apostles : all gaze upon the legs of Christ, which alone are still visible.

The scenes in the life of St. Martin in the illustration follow this order : 4, 2, 3, 5, 1. In no. 4 St. Martin stands at the gate of Amiens and divides his soldier's cloak in half to clothe a beggar. (2) St. Martin, who has already donned the monastic habit, cures the sick during an epidemic. (3) St. Martin is celebrating mass as bishop of Tours : upon the altar stand the chalice and its veil, the gospels, two candles and a crucifix and lastly, the episcopal mitre. (5) The death of the saint, whose spirit two angels bear to heaven. (1) St. Martin is buried by his monks.

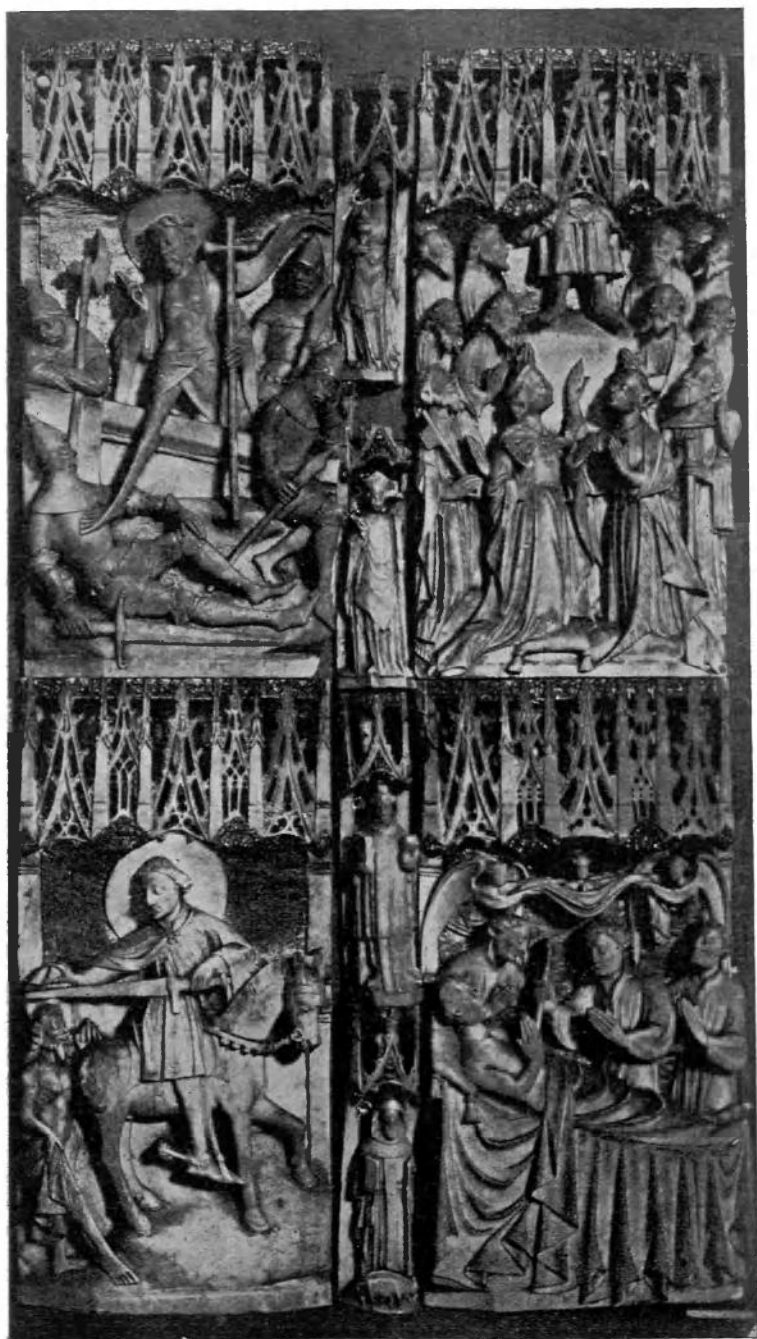
¹ Ibid. pl. 27. The cure of the parish, M. l'Abbe Chambon has been kind enough

to assemble them for the purpose of the illustration here produced.



[M. l'abbé Chambon, phot.]

ALABASTER REREDOS AT GENISSAC, MIDDLE PANELS.



[M. l'abbé Chambon, phot.]

ALABASTER REREDOS AT GENISSAC, RIGHT HAND SIDE.

These panels, which are of the fifteenth century, still show the preference for frames. In the case of St. Martin dividing his cloak with a beggar the two stepped buttresses are clearly visible. The little bosses of inverted foliage of characteristic treatment can be seen under the canopies.



ALABASTER TABLE IN THE MUSEUM OF THE ARCHITECTURAL ASSOCIATION,
REPRESENTING THE CORONATION OF THE VIRGIN.



ALABASTER TABLE IN THE MUSEUM OF THE ARCHITECTURAL ASSOCIATION,
REPRESENTING THE MARTYRDOM OF ST. CATHERINE.